Saints Sinners and the Gates of Hell
Matthew 16:13-20
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John M. Buchanan

Robert McAfee Brown, one of the more articulate Presbyterian theologians, offers his readers a small quiz in his book The Bible Speaks to You. The quiz is a series of six statments (p. 190) to which the respondent answers "yes" or "no".

1. There is a God.....
2. God is concerned about man.....
3. God is creator, judge and redeemer.....
4. God is revealed in Jesus Christ .....
5. God demands obedience.....
6. One who believes these things must be active in the Church.....

Brown suggests that most people would respond with an unqualified "yes" to the first five statements, but at item #6 the protests would begin.

In another book, Beliefs That Matter, Ganse Little, past moderator of the General Assembly and pastor of a large California congregation, notes that every year he asks the members of his Junior High Communicants Class whether it is necessary for a follower of Jesus Christ to be a member of a church, and every year a great number of them answer "no". [p. 91]

Nothing in my experience puts me in the same league with Robert McAfee Brown and Ganse Little - except that I have personally encountered the truth of their assertions time and time again. In the popular mind being a Christian and belonging to the Church are just not related. That popular mind exists outside the church, but not exclusively, for I discover an astonishing number of church members who vehemently defend a Christian's right to belong or not to belong, depending on his own whimsy. The Church, that is to say, is altogether optional.

And yet, Sunday after Sunday, you and I stand up and confess our faith; and one of the things we confess is our belief in the Church. We believe in God the Father Almight, and in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord, we believe in the

Holy Ghost, the forgiveness of sin, the life everlasting and we believe in the holy catholic Church.

Now, there is a slight discrepency here. On the one hand people standing to affirm their belief in the Church as an article of faith, as an integral part of the Gospel: and on the other hand the Church popularly relegated to the status of an optional organization, like the P.T.A. or service club, to which a man may belong or not belong depending on how he prefers to spend his Sunday mornings.

It has been said that herein is the fundamental heresy of our age, and I would suggest that that statement is true. The person who can answer "yes" to Brown's first five questions and "no" to number six, hasn't the vaguest notion of what he has said "yes" to - or else he isn't being honest. Belief in the Church is as fundamental to the Christian as belief in the existence of God.

Let's look at the record. One day Jesus asked his disciples who men were saying he was. They reported that some people were confusing him with John the Baptist: others thought he was Elijah or one of the prophets returned from the dead. But then he turned the question to them - which seems odd to us because we assume they must have known before they became a part of his entourage - "Who do you say that I am?" It was Peter, often brash, often the spokesman, who volunteered - "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". It was not common knowledge: in fact, Jesus attributed Peter's sudden flash of insight to God's revelation - "Flesh and blood hasn't revealed that to you, Peter." And then a series of statements that are both terribly important and terribly misunderstood. "You are Peter - and on this rock I will build my Church and the powers of death (gates of Hell) will not prevail against it." For centuries the Church has debated the meaning of that. The Roman Catholic position has been that here is the scriptural establishment of the Papacy. The Church is built on St. Peter -- and all authority is granted to him and his successors -- even though Jesus said absolutely nothing about a series of successors. The Protestant position is that Jesus really meant that the Church would be built

on the rock of faith like Peter's - even though he said nothing that resembles that either. I would suggest that we allow the text to stand, as it is. Peter, in fact, was the leading light in the early Church before Paul. He was the spokesman: he was a rock. The important thing about the sequence is, in my mind, the fact that a confession of faith in Jesus Christ is tied directly to the existence of and membership in the Church - and the related fact of what happened immediately afterward.

Peter was a momentary saint. But he was also a sinner. Jesus went on to tell how he must suffer and die. And Peter, the one who had seen the identity of Jesus, the one who had the courage to voice his conviction, the one on whom the Church would be built, proceeded to demonstrate that he really hadn't understood what it was all about. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But suffering and death? "God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you." This time around Jesus' response to Peter was a little different: "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not on the side of God but of man." It's quite a demotion. One minute blessed, strong, a rock of faith: the next minute Satan, bungling, insensitive, shallow. Yet it is still Peter upon whom Jesus will build a Church: a saint - and a sinner - but the gates of hell will not prevail against that Church.

Much has been made of the suggestion that Jesus didn't intend to establish a Church at all. And one line of New Testament Scholarship attributes this entire portion of the book of Matthew to a later insert. In fact, the Greek word for church, Ekklesia, appears only three times in the Gospel narrative, all three in Matthew and two times in this text. It is true, with this one exception, there is very little in the words of Jesus specifically talking about a church. But that statement must be understood in the context of our Lord's Jewishness - and in the context of the fact that he had gathered around him a small community of people clearly assigned to carry on the work of teaching, preaching, healing and worshipping. That is to say, Jesus didn't spend much time talking about a community that already existed.

Jesus was a Jew: and to be a Jew means to be one of a people: a people chosen and elected by God for a certain responsibility in the world. A Jew received his identity from the Covenant between God and his people; with its beginnings in Abraham's pilgrimage and Moses' deliverence of the law. A Jew was one of those people - God's people - the holy nation. Jesus was one of them. The people with whom he lived and worked were part of it. And the group of followers he gathered about him was an extension of that people. Nothing is more certain than that.

In the Old Testament there is no such thing as a solitary Jew. Faith in God, meant belonging to the Covenant people. So the New Testament deals with the new Covenant: the new people of God. To believe in Jesus Christ was to belong to this community. The early Christians could not have separated believing and belonging - for they were one and the same. Faith in Christ - made one a member of the Church.

That, very briefly, is the scriptural foundation of the Church - and, as you can see, it is a long way from the current attitude.

Ernest Campbell, minister of preaching at New York's Riverside Church, says that the position of a growing number of people is "Jesus - yes: the Church - no." The test with which we began and statistical studies prove him correct. Everybody is for Jesus - with about the same degree of intensity they would be in support of motherhood. But very few individuals see that being "for Jesus" - means absolutely nothing until it moves a man into the company of followers. Probing a little deeper, a growing number of committed Christians - people who believe that Jesus was the Christ - are dropping out of the Church because they have trouble seeing the connection between what goes on inside an average congregation - and the words of the one who founded it. There are those who have given up on the institutional Church and who either join an "underground church" meeting in homes, or else decide to go it alone. Their ranks are growing: and becuase they do what they do out of a deep commitment to Jesus Christ, they deserve our ear and our response.

The Church has its faults. Any apologia for institutional Christianity that didn't acknowledge that fact would be guilty of gross error. The history of Christianity is not always pretty. The Church has been involved in the Crusades - the Spanish Inquisition: the Church in our century nodded in approval at Hitler and Mussolini: the Church in our nation blessed slavery and war. And today the Church sometimes seems like the last bastion of total unconcern with the issues of human dignity and social justice. But, let us remember that Peter was both saint and sinner: so - we are all. Let us remember too - in response to the anti-institution movement - that ideas need forms; that no idea exists for long without a structure. To be sure - the institution may be slow and cumbersome - it may be 20 years behind the pace of cultural change. But - and again I use the words of Erni Campbell: "A motorcycle may execute a U turn quicker than a trailer truck, but in the long run it's the truck that delivers the goods". [The Protestant Hour, Plain Words for Troubled Times p. 33ff]

Of course the ledger has two sides, and I think in our anxiety to be honest about the Church we forget that fact. The Church in the Middle Ages may have been hopelessly corrupt, but it was also soley responsible for keeping alive the arts and letters that would finally bring an end to the Dark Ages. The Church may have blessed slavery: but it was also the Church which first called slavery for what it is - and it is still the institutional church that is literally giving its life and blood for the restitution of that historical iniquity. The Church may have turned its head while Hitler came to power: but it was also the Church that went underground in Germany - and today in China - rather than submit to totalitarianism of any kind. The Church may spend inordinate amounts of dollars on its own self-enhancement: but a UNESCO survey serveral years ago pointed out that well over 80% of the health and education services in the whole continent of Africa were either carried out or started by the Christian Church. The Church may be insensitive to human need but it has been said that the British Labor movmment owes far more to John Wesley than it does to Karl Marx; and it is a fact that the movement in England

which honors those who organized the first labor union in the world bears the names of four men, three of whom were Methodist preachers. [See Robert Goodrich - "On Being the Church" - The Protestant Hour, 5/6/69]

The debate about the effectiveness of the Church in the past, and the role of the Church in the present can go on endlessly. And it should. The important point is that for the Christian - the Church is an article of faith. It is one of the "givens" for the Christian.

We need to remember that - and to remind each other of that. Today is Stewardship Sunday, a most important annual event in the life of this congregation. But I've always felt that if the Church people really meant what they affirm in the Apostles' Creed, all the trauma would be gone from Stewardship. To believe in Jesus Christ is to belong to his people: and his people - for better and for worse; saints and sinners simultaeneously, are here in his Church. Let's not ever be apologetic about that.

Jesus promised that his church - his people with one foot in the Biblical tradition and the other foot squarely in the world he loved - would not fail. "The gates of hell will not prevail against it." That's an important promise because it tells us this thing in which we believe, and to which we belong, is bigger than any of us individually - bigger than our congregation and our denomination. It forces us to take the overview and to see a long line of saints and sinners walking through history - trying in very human ways - to be faithful to their Lord. It forces us to take the broad view and see a committed company of saints and sinners throughout the world today - struggling with the particular agonies of being faithful in 1969.

I believe in the Church. I believe the Church is coming alive today in a way that is new and unique. I see the Church struggling with its essential unity: I see the Church trying desparately to listen to the cacophony of sounds coming from a tired and torn world: I see a Church putting its very life on the line in areas where its Lord would want it to be involved.

I despair at times about the Church -: I despair at what it is in light

of what it ought to be: at what it does in light of what Christ calls it to do. But I believe in the Church - because ultimately it is not mine, nor yours, nor the Presbyterians' nor Methodists' - but Jesus Christ's. It is his - and it will not fail. And because of that it is worth our belief - our devotion - our very lives.

Amen.

Our Father, we don't often think in these terms - but we are grateful for your Church through the ages. We are grateful to be a part of your holy people. And although we stumble and fall - we would serve you with complete devotion. Be with your Church - be with us - as we seek to be your faithful and obedient people: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen